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July 2009

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		
« Jun				Aug »		

- [September 2009](#)
- [August 2009](#)
- [July 2009](#)
- [June 2009](#)
- [May 2009](#)
- [April 2009](#)
- [March 2009](#)
- [February 2009](#)
- [January 2009](#)
- [December 2008](#)
- [November 2008](#)
- [October 2008](#)
- [September 2008](#)
- [August 2008](#)
- [July 2008](#)
- [June 2008](#)
- [May 2008](#)
- [April 2008](#)
- [March 2008](#)
- [February 2008](#)
- [January 2008](#)
- [December 2007](#)
- [November 2007](#)
- [October 2007](#)
- [September 2007](#)
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- [May 2007](#)
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[A YEAR LATER: Recalling the General Industries inferno](#)

Lisa Roberson

ELYRIA — It had everything that makes a fire dangerous, volatile and, yet in a strange way, beautiful.

It was early on the morning of July 3, 2008, when the Elyria Fire Department was called to the corner of Olive and Taylor streets and discovered an inferno ripping its way through the former General Industries building.

No one will forget the flames that shot 200 feet into the air or the flying debris that catapulted from the building and sprayed several city blocks with hot embers. Three-story tall brick walls collapsed, feeding the fire with bursts of oxygen. Huge clouds of smoke billowed for hours, and the magnitude of the blaze exhausted firefighters, who numbered at more than 120 at the fire's peak.

For 16 hours, the biggest fire in recent city history raged and through it all, the Elyria Fire Department that orchestrated one of the largest fire suppression events in county history.

"I'm proud. We did a hell of a job that night," said fire Capt. Joe Pronesti, then-interim fire chief. "The guys that made the decision in the first five minutes saved five city blocks."

A claim to fame

Pronesti jokingly calls the General Industries fire his claim to fame in the six months he headed the department.

He always knew fighting a fire at the building would push the department to its breaking point.

"Every day, I would go past it thinking I have to take my guys with me and tell them to know this building because if it ever caught fire, it would give us trouble," Pronesti said.

The tactical decision to not have firefighters enter the General Industries building in the midst of the roaring fire was not one made in the heat of the moment.

Instead, fire officials have said for years that should a fire break out at the sprawling complex, firefighters would concentrate on containing the blaze while protecting surrounding businesses and homes. Still, Pronesti said, there was never any formal firefighting strategy put to paper regarding the General Industries building.

The closest thing to a plan can only be found in old inspection reports. There, fire inspectors documented their concern over the building's lack of adequate fire-suppression systems and its structural instability. The most telling statement came in a report dated December 2005 when Lt. Rick Thrasher concluded his inspection with a written warning to "stay out under fire conditions."

And, on the night of the fire, that is what firefighters did.

'It was a good one'

Recalling the events of the night, Pronesti spoke in an energetic voice.

"What do you want to know?" he said. "I remember everything about that night."

In order to fully understand the events of that July 3, Pronesti begins his story on June 26, 2008.

On that day, the first of two fires to take place at the old factory ignited on a back dock. It caused a lot of smoke but no real damage because the structure was being taken apart for salvage, fire officials said.

At that time, Assistant Fire Chief Glenn Saddler offered a premonition of what would happen a week later.

Saddler said it was fortunate the fire didn't break out at the end of the day, because it would have easily spread to the large General Industries building.

"I told them, 'You're going to have to be really careful in there because it was all combustible material,' " Saddler said. "If it was at night, the damage would have been much greater because it could have gone undetected longer." Pronesti said everyone got lucky on June 26. But not so on July 3.

On that night, Pronesti said he was at home. His wife and daughters had just returned from a concert, and everyone was getting ready to go to bed.

When his phone rang at nearly 2 a.m., Elyria firefighter Jody Dorsey was on the other end.

"He said, 'General Industries is on fire again, and it was a good one,' " Pronesti said. "I just jumped up, changed my clothes and headed out the door. As soon as I got into the chief's truck, my radio was just squawking. I knew from the sound in (Assistant Chief Tim) Mitchell's voice it was going to be pretty good."

Once he arrived, Pronesti said he knew immediately he would need help — and a lot of it.

Mutual aid

When Pronesti drove up and saw fire on all three floors of building near the loading dock, he said he immediately thought about who he needed and what each person or department could add to the situation.

The first call he made was to Sheffield Fire Chief Jeff Young. A fellow firefighter and mentor to Pronesti for years, Young was calm, cool and skilled at fighting fires. He was everything Pronesti said he needed immediately.

"Calling for help early on was probably the best decision that was made all night," Young said. "The command officers of Elyria didn't just stand around looking at it, thinking this is going to be big. They immediately called for a lot of help. They knew it was going to spread if they didn't get some help there fast. I was really impressed by that."

Young, who lives on Pasadena Avenue, said he got to the fire quickly. But he knew before he set foot in the neighborhood the task would be daunting.

"When I opened my back door to leave, there was smoke in my backyard," he said.

Arriving early gave Young a clear picture of the work that needed to be done. He said he knew the biggest challenge would be water.

"It was so hot and there were so many buildings around it," he said. "We were really worried about it spreading to the north. Believe me, there was a lot of questions if that was going to happen that night. There was a huge need for water, and it just wasn't there."

Pronesti knew the same thing, which was exactly why the second call he made was to Avon Fire Chief Frank Root.

Root, a former Elyria firefighter who spent 17 years in Elyria fighting fires before heading to Avon, said he knew when his phone rang what he was being called to do. As soon as Pronesti took over as interim chief in mid-May, he put a call out to Root, asking him to be the water supply officer in the event of a large fire.

Root said he took the job not knowing he would be called upon so soon.

"Being the water supply officer in a city is not the same as it is in the country," he said. "When it's out in a rural area, usually a water supply officer deals with tankers and drafting ponds. I had been to those events but never orchestrated one myself."

Still, Root said as soon as he neared Elyria, a bright glow in the sky greeted him along the horizon, and he knew it was going to be a long night.

"I had been in some really large fires in Elyria and Avon, but that was possibly the biggest," he said.

With Root handling the water supply and Young leading an effort to protect Valley Natural Gas at 151 Olive St., which has large outdoor propane and oxygen tanks, Pronesti said he divided the remaining duties among the other firefighters and fire departments at the scene.

Elyria Assistant Fire Chief Ron Brlas was stationed on the west side of the building. Mitchell and a crew went to the back, while Pronesti said he stayed up front. Three firefighters from Lorain worked to protect Midwest Siding Co. at 150 Olive St.

Elyria Assistant Fire Chief Bob Dempsey and crews from Elyria Township and Amherst were stationed near 605 Taylor St. That building houses LifeShare's entire fleet of bloodmobiles and blood collection supplies.

"That was probably the hardest part of that night — knowing I might have to give that building up, too, in order to save the nearby houses," Pronesti said. "The whole facade was on fire, and the radiant heat was just melting the front of the building."

Losing that building would have devastated LifeShare's operations, said spokeswoman Lisa Mayles.

"If they hadn't saved the building, it would have rendered us unable to collect blood for several months to a year," she said. "Yes, we would have been able to maybe get operations back up in a few months, but it takes a year to build out a bloodmobile. So, they did a huge thing for us."

And, while firefighters worked to save buildings and residents from the path of the fire, Wellington Fire Chief Robert Walker who was put in charge of keeping the firefighters safe, Pronesti said.

"Just about everyone who responded did so with little regard for their own lives," he said. "A lot of our guys got commendations for that night. I needed someone there whose job it was to make sure everyone was being safe."

Looking back

Reminiscing about a 16-hour battle to save a neighborhood brings out war stories. Soldiers on the front line of battle always have a story to tell, and recounting how they battled the fire at General Industries is no different.

"This was not the kind of fire or team effort that happens every day," Pronesti said. "It just went off without a hitch. It was as good as anyone could hope for. Sometimes the work of a firefighter can be taken for granted, but that night every firefighter took to heart every word of the firefighter oath. When I think back to that night, I think about how well everyone worked together."

Before the night was over, Lorain County's 22 fire departments were completely exhausted. With every firefighter in Elyria at the fire, Pronesti said it was the North Olmsted Fire Department that covered the rest of the city.

And, despite that the building, which remains a pile of rubble, was destroyed, Pronesti said he takes solace in a few truths from that night.

No one was hurt.

No residential home was lost in the fire.

And, the Elyria Fire Department learned a valuable lesson to be called upon again in future fires.

"There are a lot of General Industries fires waiting to happen in the city," he said. "And, no matter if we have eight guys or 22 guys, we have to be ready to go. There is a rule in the fire department: Know your building.

"Knowing that building is what really paid off for us."

Contact Lisa Roberson at 329-7121 or Iroberson@chroniclet.com.

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 Filed by [Lisa Roberson](#) July 4th, 2009 in [BREAKING](#), [Top Stories](#).

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2 Responses to "A YEAR LATER: Recalling the General Industries inferno"

1.  [Wakeupelyria](#) says:
[July 4, 2009 at 10:18 am](#)

What happened to the investigation concerning the communication between the building department and the fire department? I believed it died because the administration did not want their part in this mess to come to light.

What former assistant safety service director was working on community development when this company moved to Elyria? I believe that it was current safety service director chris eichenlaub. He is the one that brought John Peshek and his business into our town.

Could that relationship be the base for the rumor that he also "suggested" that the building department look for ways to help John Peshek re-open the building.

If this is true there was not any miscommunication between the fire department and the building department; rather a mis-directive given to the building department.

I believe that city council needs to require an independent review to determine what really happened and why Mr. Peshek was allowed to re-open the building.

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2.  [Bigfiginya27](#) says:
[July 4, 2009 at 11:07 pm](#)

what's the matter? Just looks like another ghetto to me.

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